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**50 Years of the Parole System  
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# Our Parole Hearing

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**This is a unique collection of interviews with four people who took part in the same Parole Board oral hearing in August 2017. They agreed to be interviewed after the hearing and were asked exactly the same questions to talk about their involvement in the hearing and what their experiences of the day were.**

The participants were: a representative of the Secretary of State, the chair of the oral hearing panel, a family member of the victim, and the prisoner.

The prisoner was convicted of murder and is serving a life sentence. The family member has taken part in Restorative Justice with the prisoner and read a Victim Personal Statement at the hearing.

## **What part did you play in this hearing?**

**SoS:** A representative from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) attends every hearing where a victim wants to deliver their Victim Personal Statement (VPS) in person to the Parole Board. I see our role as being the guardian of the day. Our overriding objective is to make sure the victims have the best experience possible, in what are very emotionally taxing and difficult circumstances

**Chair:** I was the chair of the panel conducting the hearing. I was one of three Parole Board members reviewing the case. I gave attention to the process of the hearing that is, how it was run, but also asked some questions.

**Family:** I was a member of the victim's immediate family attending the hearing to read out my VPS. I am the twin brother of the person who was murdered by the offender almost 20 years ago, and I attended with my parents. I went into the room to read out my VPS which detailed a personal reflection on how the murder impacted myself, my family and friends over the years.

**Prisoner:** This was an opportunity to express to a panel what I had done in the last 18 months since my last parole review and to share my hopes for the future. It would be an opportunity also to think about what might be outstanding in terms of further work and what I need to do to address this. My primary role was to be present and to answer every question or concern. I listened actively to what was being said and I wanted to be present for the victim's family. The hearing is an outlet, and opportunity for them to let go of anything that they want to express.

## **Why did you want to do this? What is your motivation to do this work?**

**SoS:** I was keen to develop my skills in a different area of work having been an Offender Manager and having done victim empathy work with prisoners and people on licence. However, nothing could have prepared me for supporting a person who has lost a loved one or suffered a serious assault and to hear them recount the devastation and destruction that this has caused them.

**Chair:** I have spent many years working in the criminal justice system, as well as in other organisations which provide services to vulnerable people in the community. The Parole Board gives me the opportunity to use my knowledge and experience in a different setting. It is very important that the Parole Board makes fair and justifiable decisions, and I feel that I have something to contribute, as well as having the skills for the work.

**Family:** This is I think my 5th or 6th parole hearing over the years. I come to these hearings out of a sense of purpose for my brother and his family and friends, and to be a voice in the room that can truly relay the impact of such a crime on my family. We have seen and observed over the years that reading out our statements at parole hearings has a profound effect on the room, and enables us to be satisfied that we have done as much as we can for my brother, and in a way being there to represent him — I personally feel this even more as his identical twin brother.

Attendance is partly also a way of helping us continually move on and recover inside ourselves, although the experience remains very emotional no matter how many times you have done it. Coming to the hearings for me is also a means to look the offender in the eye to say what you want to say instead of a third party reading your statement which is just not the same. After a gap of 10 years or more since the offence we were notified that attendance at hearings was possible and we knew straight away that we were ready to meet the offenders of the crime and truly realised it was the right thing for us to do. I don't think many families know about the possibility to attend parole hearings and for us it remains a very important part of our moving on and acceptance, particularly regarding the looming release dates. For me personally attending parole hearings has led to very positive follow

on actions relating to my own reflection and recovery in the last 3-4 years.

**Prisoner:** It was important for me to share the details of the work that I have done and express my desire to be progressed and released. I don't want to stagnate. Life is about living and there are things I want to do and achieve. I am still young. I can do good. It hinders me to be in jail. I know that the parole review is about answering concerns and questions about risk. I think the VPS helps my victim's family release feelings that they have kept in.

Listening and feeling the words leaves an emotional resonance in me and creates a feeling of energy. The spoken word is powerful, and it carries. I can never right my wrong, but I think it is important to allow my victim's family an outlet to say what they feel — it would be cowardly not to allow them this. I don't see the Parole Board as my hearing, it is a hearing about my crime and everyone's view is important. The crime, and my risk is being reviewed. I'm the perpetrator and so a lot of the content is focused on me; but it is a multi-faceted process and a lot of parts are played out.

#### **How did you prepare?**

**SoS:** I liaised with prison staff to ensure that all the facilities are in place to accommodate the family properly and decently. I also spoke to the victim's family in advance to answer any questions about the process and how the oral hearing would unfold. I arrived at the prison about 2 hours in advance of the hearing to inspect the facilities and walked the route to satisfy myself that the family will have no uncontrolled contact with the prisoner. This also gave me an opportunity to see the oral hearing room and arrange it in a way that best suited the needs of the victims.

**Chair:** Overall, it is important to be aware of the effects of crime, the reasons for people committing offences and to understand the work undertaken by the prisons and Probation Service. However, in individual cases, I prepare for a parole hearing by reading and thinking about the information that has been provided in advance in the dossier. This includes reports from the prison and Probation Service, reports about programmes that have been completed, and sometimes medical, psychological or psychiatric reports. Also, there may be written representations that have been made in advance by the prisoner or his/her legal representative. On this occasion, there were also three written statements in the dossier from the victim's twin brother and parents.

**Family:** I prepared a VPS several weeks earlier and submitted it via our Victim Liaison Officer. My VPS was revised from a previous version for earlier hearings. Over the years my statement has changed as my own recovery and reflection on the offence has changed through time. I also prepare through discussions with my family and wife about general feelings and thoughts on the hearing, although our statements are generally quite private between us individually. A hearing is very emotional, and I need to take some time off work before and after to be ready. It's also hard sometimes discussing it with my work line manager as I need to be honest, yet in the same vein private about the time I need to take off work. My employers have been extremely supportive over the years.

**Prisoner:** I only became aware of my hearing date about 6 weeks to a month prior. Once I am given the firm date, I start by reviewing the risk reduction work that I have done since the last hearing. I also review my paperwork, my risk assessments and my reports. This

gives me an indication of the gaps and what the Parole Board panel might ask me. I have never had any help to prepare for my hearing, I don't expect it. I am given updates, paperwork and dates but a lot of preparation takes place in my cell on my own. I find a lot of solace in books, so I can read well.

The last oral hearing was my seventh. I have done 2.5 years of

therapy and I understand the root causes of my offending. I sometimes overthink things and I guard myself against this as it is important at a parole hearing to speak from the heart. I speak about what comes up and have faith that the work that I have done and the space that I am now in, will come through. I used to ruminate a lot but now I think that everything is how it is meant to be — in the right place. If it was meant to be different it would have been. I try not to project into the future too much, and instead I try to remain in the present.

#### **What were you thinking about just before the hearing?**

**SoS:** Before this hearing, I felt happy because the person organising the oral hearing at the prison was competent and willing to go the extra mile. She had personally cleaned the room that the victim's family would be waiting in, and even bought nice mugs so they weren't drinking out of old ones. I was worried about the distance that the victim's elderly father would have to walk from the waiting room to the oral hearing room, but having looked at all the alternatives, I decided that the room was the most suitable.

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**Chair:** Just prior to the hearing, the panel discussed the issues that were likely to be of importance and where the focus of attention should be when it asked questions. The purpose of the hearing is to assess the risk of serious harm in the community and to decide whether to direct release or recommend progression to open conditions. I was also thinking about how the victim's family might feel when they come into the hearing room to read their statements. I was considering how the prisoner might react to what he hears. I was thinking about where everyone should sit to be comfortable and how I might respond to any difficulties if they arose. As the offence in this case was murder, it was only to be expected that the emotions of everyone participating in the hearing could be close to the surface.

**Family:** Just nerves generally...butterflies and emotions flying through your head...very mixed thoughts about the prisoner, about how he might react and how you want to get through your statement without tears and breaking down. The walk to the room and waiting before is also very difficult, and I have lots of nervous energy and thoughts on doing this for my brother and being there for my mum and dad.

**Prisoner:** I wonder what questions will come up. I am anxious and nervous of the unknown. I worry whether I will get a nice panel or one that tries to trip me up (which I have never had; but you hear horror stories). I ready myself for the victim personal statements. I prepare myself to look at my victim's family, not to stare but not to look down at the table either. I want them to be able to speak the words to me and ready myself for what I will absorb. It will affect me and it will make me feel down. I want to be ready and prepared to process it. I try to feel the feelings, cry, meditate, go over the detail and process it. At one prison they handed me the victim impact statements and they told me to ask for support if I needed it, but mostly I read them on my own. I try to read them several times, but it is the emotion at the hearing that is the most impactful.

### **What was the most difficult thing for you to deal with?**

**SoS:** The most difficult thing for me to deal with was the distress of the victim's mum and dad. The victim was a twin, and his brother was also at the hearing with his wife. I wonder how it must be seeing the living evidence every day of what the victim could have been. The relationships you develop with people

in such a short space of time are very intense and this family is no exception.

**Chair:** I can't say that there was anything that was difficult to deal with — apart from some of the practicalities. Each family member wished to read their statement without the other family members in the room. While this was not problematic in itself, it raised some logistical issues because the waiting room was not near the oral hearing room. Consequently, there was a delay while each family member was escorted to the hearing room.

I thought that this might lead to the prisoner becoming very anxious and not able to focus but in fact he remained very calm and accepting of the situation. Victims or victim's family members (who are also victims themselves) attend a hearing only to read their statements. This takes place at the beginning of the oral hearing and then they leave the prison.

**Family:** It's just those first few moments going to the oral hearing room, opening the door and getting prepared to read out your statement. I remember the first time I attended a parole hearing we had a long walk from our waiting room to the oral hearing room. We had to go up and down stairs and my legs were so wobbly with nerves I could barely manage it. Then when I walked in and saw the prisoner for the first time in 15 years since the trial, I filled with adrenalin and emotion. This moment for the last hearing that I attended was also still so incredibly powerful and yet difficult.

**Prisoner:** It's the victim's mother's statement and her loss that really hits home. For me this is the most difficult part. At the last hearing I listened and absorbed what she said. All the victim impact statements have changed over time. At the last hearing, the victim's brother's statement contained more understanding and acceptance. His father always expressed a lot of anger when he spoke but now he looks at me and although the content of the statement hasn't changed much; there is less anger I feel. The victim's mother spoke to me and her words contained messages for me; messages about not messing up and words of encouragement to get back on track. Deep words that I need to absorb.

The victim's twin brother is always positive, but this does not detract from the fact that his brother died. The victim's brother and I have engaged in a restorative justice process and this has helped me to come to terms with what I have done. The victim's brother has said that although he will never forgive me, he has come to terms with how I arrived in that dark place. He accepts

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that I will be released one day. He wants me to do something positive with my life and not let the restorative justice experience that we have both been through, go to waste. He is a role model for me. He has never judged me. Even through his immense anger and pain, he speaks about the impact and never moves to blaming.

The victim's brother read out his VPS in 2014 and it had a real impact on me. I cried, listened and nodded. Then someone spoke to me about restorative justice. Restorative justice added a layer of responsibility to me. I was in awe of him after the restorative justice meeting. It would be easy for him to be angry, he has every right and I would have been ready to absorb it. The fact that I had not included him and his family in any decisions that I was making; but after the restorative justice process, they have become present enough in my mind to influence all my future decisions.

### What support did you have?

**SoS:** I look to see who the panel chair is. In my experience, some are more comfortable in dealing with victims and their families than others. I'm nervous if it's not someone I've worked with before but helpfully this panel chair turns out to be really good. She visits the family before the hearing and takes the time to explain the process without making the family feel rushed or harried.

**Chair:** Support for all parole hearings is provided by the case managers that work in the Parole Board's office in London. However, the prison also plays a part, by compiling the dossier and by providing a member of staff on the day to assist with the hearing arrangements. At this hearing, the victim's family were accompanied by the Secretary of State's representative, who explained to them how the hearing would proceed, and who sat next to them in the hearing room to support them if necessary.

**Family:** The support network is very important. My family, particularly my wife who doesn't usually come to the hearings but did to this one (her first) just to be with me before and after. Also my mum and dad, who came with me to the hearing to read out their VPS. The Victim Liaison Officer (VLO) is also a key part of the process, helping to guide and steer us through all aspects including the key logistics.

Over the years you form a close connection with your VLO who becomes a crucial conduit for the process. At the prison itself our Secretary of State representative is a key confidante and support who steers us through the day. Having supported us through

previous hearings, she was a welcome familiar face on this day. Also welcome was a briefing from the panel chair, who came over to the room we were waiting in to say hello and explain the process of the hearing and to check if we had any questions.

**Prisoner:** I get most of my support from my mum and sister and my little nieces who are growing up quickly. My solicitor and his assistant are also quite involved. My solicitor is not business-like in his dealings at all. He's personable and cares. Building up to the oral hearing we speak sporadically on the phone and there is an increase of calls and visits prior to the hearing. We go over the release plan in detail. My mum and sister have never attended a hearing. My mum did however write a letter for one of my hearings, about the impact on her and how she has seen me undergo a change. My sister wrote about the support that she would be able to offer on the outside. It can be difficult when you walk into the oral hearing room, but I manage it. It is

part of the process and I adapt. I have never been that overwhelmed with people in a room as I have had therapy where speaking in large groups is part of the process.

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### What was the most positive thing about the hearing?

**SoS:** Prisons were not originally set up to accommodate oral hearings or victim attendance. I try to arrive early because sometimes a detail is not quite right. I have found that prison staff are always willing to make changes when asked to support a more positive experience for victims or their families. Once I have checked everything, I meet the victim's family at the prison gate. My aim is to take care of everything, so the only thing the victim's family has to focus on is getting into the oral hearing room and reading their statements. I am with them before, during and after they deliver their statement to listen and guide as needed.

**Chair:** The statements made by the victim's family were valuable as it gave them the opportunity to express the impact that the offence had on them. That added to the panel's understanding of the consequences of the offence. As in all cases however, it did not affect the assessment of future risk.

This prisoner has engaged with the victim's brother in a restorative justice process earlier in his sentence and it was clear that it had been a positive experience and that it had deeply affected him. The prisoner said that it had more of an influence on how he thought about his past offending, and possible future offending, than any of the programmes that

he had completed. In talking about the restorative justice work, he demonstrated his empathy and current attitudes which does influence the assessment of risk. The victim's brother told the panel that his involvement in the restorative justice process had been one of the things that has helped him deal with the emotional impact of the offence.

**Family:** It's undoubtedly the feeling you get when you are in full flow reading out your statement. The listening in the whole room is very powerful and we always observe an emotional response in the prisoner, very often tears. You get a wonderful feeling of achievement afterwards, which nudges you to say 'that's why I did it...'

**Prisoner:** The atmosphere that it was conducted in was positive and felt supportive. The panel were reassuring, and the panel chair came out and introduced herself to me before the hearing started. The questions were clear, I understood them, and they heard me — really heard me. Overall, I was relaxed and at ease. I felt listened to. I have been to a few oral hearings where they move you on to their line of questioning, but at this one I felt fully heard. Sometimes I can get anxious about how it is going but if I feel listened to, I can focus on what is happening in the room rather than being pre-occupied with pre-empting questions and giving distracted answers.

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### **How did you cope with the prison environment?**

**SoS:** The pressure to make sure things go well is enormous because of the human cost should something go wrong due to a logistical issue. In this case, I had met the family previously at another oral hearing and wanted the day to go smoothly for them. I remember when I first started doing this work, victims telling me about a careless comment or word from professionals working with them and this has stuck with me. I choose my words carefully as I do not want to make that grain of sand comment that victims remember and that can cause them distress even years later.

**Chair:** Because I go into prisons a lot and hear from prisoners about their experiences, I have some understanding of the realities of prison life — ranging from the quality of the food to day to day relationships with prison staff. However, my personal experience of prisons in this role is different and limited. I go to a specially designated hearing room

and see little of the prison itself. However, it is easy to spot those prisons that take more care about the physical surroundings and those that do not, which I tend to believe indicates something about how prisons are run. It is also noticeable that in some prisons, the Offender Supervisor has time to engage with prisoners on a regular basis, but in others there is virtually no contact. This means that the information provided by the prison to the panel about the prisoner's progress might be more limited than would be preferable.

**Family:** I have no issues with visiting prison. All of the prisons I have visited for hearings show you the utmost dignity and respect. At HMP Elmley we had a very positive experience and the staff tried their best to put you at ease. I felt secure and safe, and we had a comfortable room to base ourselves in with an officer waiting with us at all times.

**Prisoner:** On the day of the hearing everything feels important. The things that happen in prison that would not normally bother you, assume new significance. If you are not unlocked on time it can affect whether you can have a shower. If you are not collected from the wing on time, then you can't get a vital document photocopied. If all goes well on the day of a hearing, I like to get up, have breakfast,

shower, look over the dossier, wait for my Offender Supervisor to collect me and then go to the oral hearing. But it doesn't flow like that sometimes. I want to look like I have made an effort for the hearing. When I was at one prison, I couldn't get my shower as it was a late unlock. I was sharing a cell and the radio was blaring and I couldn't reflect over what I might say. I was placed in a small room on the side of the oral hearing room, and as a certain amount of time had passed, I couldn't speak to my solicitor. I had no time to process anything or to come down from the stress of it all at the end.

### **What do you think went well?**

**SoS:** I felt pleased about this hearing apart from the distance that the victim's father had to walk to the oral hearing room. There was little hanging around at the prison gate and the family waiting room was bright and comfortable with hot drinks provided. The panel chair was welcoming and humane and the prisoner remained in the hearing room while they read their statements which was in accordance with the families' wishes.

**Chair:** At this hearing, I think we were able to draw out comprehensive evidence from the witnesses that

assisted with the assessment of risk and allowed for a clear decision to be made. I thought that the attendance of the victim's family was of value to them, to the prisoner and to the panel. I think that all participants had the opportunity to say what they felt it was important for the panel to hear. That is the basis for a fair hearing.

**Family:** It all went well I feel, I don't have any specific areas to highlight in this respect. As mentioned above we said our piece for my brother in a dignified respectful way, and we felt listened to.

**Prisoner:** Everything felt like it went well — the questions, the timing, how it was led by the panel chair. It was a positive experience. I have done huge damage. At previous hearings the victim's family spoke their words with emotion, but this time they spoke them at me and the emotion was directed at me. It felt different, they were speaking to me. My victim's twin brother has always done this but this time, his parents spoke their words with purpose and intention. They were letting go of more of their anguish and sharing it with me. I don't get to speak, so it is important that they know that I am listening. So I nod and look at them and let them know that I am listening.

#### **How did you feel about the hearing once it had finished?**

**SoS:** After a hearing, I can de-brief with my manager or there is the employee well-being helpline that has trained counsellors. When I worked with men

who had committed sexual offences, I had regular therapy sessions with a psychologist paid for by the Probation service. I continue to use a lot of the coping tools and techniques I was taught then.

**Chair:** Immediately following the hearing, the panel reached a joint decision, which was later put in writing and sent to the prisoner. The decision letter is not a public document, but the victim's family are informed of the outcome of the hearing. My feelings were that the hearing went well. I hoped that the prisoner would accept the reasoning behind the decision and move forward positively in preparation for his next review. I hoped that the victim's family had found the experience worthwhile as they continue to come to terms with their loss.

**Family:** Very happy and contented that we had shown courage in attending the hearing and that we had been able to see the offender and read our statements.

**Prisoner:** I feel positive in terms of how it went. I felt listened to. I'm a little drained and a little emotional. I don't try to pre-empt the decision of the panel. If I get released, I get released. If I get progressed to open, I get progressed to open. I knew that as I hadn't undertaken any home leaves, release was unlikely. I am realistic about release. I know that when I am released it will be a challenge and I will have to work on my relationships. I am not the child that I was when I went into prison.